

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

## REVIEWS

### Paul McMahon

321 GALLERY

Paul McMahon's wonderfully strange "soft" retrospective at the artist-run 321 Gallery in Brooklyn this past fall was, for a figure so doggedly unclassifiable, sympathetically out of joint. Nestled cozily into the non-rectilinear garden level of a brownstone home in Clinton Hill, the forty-four mostly framed two-dimensional works in the show—collages,

paintings, pastel drawings on newsprint, tiled postcard pieces, videos (looped together on a single monitor), posters, and mixed-media sculpture—spanned the past forty-four years of the artist's production. On the numerically related twenty-second day of what happened to be October, McMahon performed an evening song cycle in stereo—that is, silently accompanied by the lip-synching Linda Montano, who has appeared alongside the artist as a live-action double since approximately 2007.

A sprinkling of previous New York shows have sought to deal with McMahon's precarious art-historical position—mired in emergent post-Conceptualism yet predating Douglas Crimp's 1977 "Pictures" exhibition, adjacent to the CalArts mafia, and active in a nascent No Wave scene before the nihilism set in. After studying at Pomona College, he worked a day job as a gas-station attendant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and con-

currently staged a series of one-evening-only shows in a storefront community center. Operating from 1972 to 1975, Project Inc. held performances and hosted exhibitions by Michael Asher, Douglas Huebler,



Paul McMahon,  
*Spoonbill*, 1995,  
mixed media, 30 ×  
19½ × 2".

Laurie Anderson, and John Knight, and saw the first East Coast solo shows of David Salle and Jack Goldstein. The series culminated when McMahon was drafted by Helene Winer to work (briefly) as assistant director at Artists Space; this particular proximity compelled curator Douglas Eklund to include McMahon's postcard collages and pastel-saturated newsprint images in the 2009 exhibition "The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984" at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The subtle ironic distance in McMahon's sociable—not overly theoretical—practice and his reliance on poor-quality materials and diverse ephemeral activity often tangled with the divisive issues of his time, some specific to the art world (painting and its futures, a newly reflexive role for photography) and some not (the AIDS crisis), without consolidating into a clear object or picture. Reviewing a set of 1993 exhibitions of McMahon's at two now-defunct SoHo galleries, Roberta Smith described his characteristically scrappy production as somewhat iconoclastic and "not altogether endearing." Several pieces at 321 Gallery seemed to function more like evidentiary artifacts than art objects in their own right: faded smocks painted or stenciled in spotted patterns (*Horse Shirt*, 1977, and *Polka Dot T-Shirt*, 1978); the cheap and yellowing *Army Man Wallpaper*, 1977, taped to a wall; a poster advertising the "quasi-operatic" performance *Song of the Statues*, 1988. By comparison, an almost surreal wall-based amalgamation of denim pantaloons and thrift-store swamp painting (*Spoonbill*, 1995) and a site-specific shamanic altar of choice kitsch trinkets (*Altar*, 2015) appeared, in their fresh constellations of found (new and vintage) materials, *au fait* with recent art.

As far as media production, McMahon's crossover ambitions in music and in comedy were represented at 321 Gallery by the original cover artwork of his self-titled 1986 record (the blurry self-portrait *Have a Nice Day*, 1977), a handful of amateurishly drawn existential zines (*Fear of Water and Artist*, *Layman and the line between them*, both 1976), and a slender book of bad puns (*Potato Jokes*, 1984) that garnered McMahon a video spot with anchorman Morry Alter on WCBS news in 1985. At odds with the slick Pictures sensibility of his contemporaries, McMahon's uncool humorous musical activity coalesces acerbically in two video/performance works. In *How I Love Your Painting*, 1982, McMahon sweetly croons ekphrastic lyrics to custom-painted backdrops produced in collaboration with Nancy Chunn, satirizing both the machismo and rhetorical gravity associated with that era's neo-expressionist painting. In the dance short *Mild Style*, 1984, a not especially flexible McMahon enacts a bumbling appropriation of street culture that parodically rhymes with Charlie Ahearn's film *Wild Style* of the previous year. Despite the loose historicism of the works that were on view (presented in quantity rather than chronology), the overall stylistic inconsistency, irreverence for the artwork as fetish object, and droll glimpses of a charismatic life in performance throughout McMahon's oeuvre make a strong case against the generational classifications that so often presuppose ideological, historical, and even commercial ends.

—Kari Rittenbach